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My name is Cindy Sparing. I'm an RN, CCHP (certified correctional healthcare provider) through the National Commission on Correctional HealthCare. I worked as a nurse at MSP in Deer Lodge for 3 ½ years. I am here today to speak as a proponent of HB number 224: Loan Reimbursement Program for State Institutional Nurses.

A little history on me. I volunteered in my community for 17 years with the Great Divide Ski Patrol and another 7 years as a volunteer EMT/Fire Rescue with Baxendale Volunteer Fire Department west of Helena. During those years, my heart's desire was to take my medical training a giant step further...so as my youngest child prepared for college I too filled out a FAFSA and entered the nursing program at Carroll College graduating with a BA in nursing in 2005. After a stellar student experience I had established myself to work anywhere I wanted but after tons of research and two visits I chose to take a nursing position at the Montana State Prison in Deer Lodge. During my matriculation at Carroll I felt a deep calling into Public and Community Health Nursing and after much research I knew the prison would afford me a very broad experience in this discipline. I also knew when I made the choice to work at the prison that I was choosing to pass on the possibility of any loan payback program and have dutifully written a \$200.00 check to the Student Assistance Foundation on the 15th of every month since I made my decision. I will continue to do this for 6 1/2 more years. Because of this, I have an acute reminder every month of the added burden I took on for choosing to work in a Montana institution.

I also now understand how difficult it is to be a corrections nurse and how important it is for the State of Montana to hedge itself for the nursing shortage by becoming more competitive in recruiting and retaining the best nurses. Part of this process is definitely the influence of offering loan payback incentives for nurses entering the profession in one of our many state institutions.

Corrections/Institutional nursing is not the step-child of other nursing areas. We work under an established Nurse Practice Act of the ANA and have industry certifications such as CCHP just like any other nursing discipline. We work with men, women and adolescents who come from some of the most medically under-served demographics in our state. We work with a population that on one end of the spectrum is aging and peppered with chronic disease process and on the other end is youthful and suffering the horrific systemic effects from their drug addictions and everything you can imagine in between. Our work is an amazing combination of med-surg, ER, clinic, psych, end-of-life, home health, and community and public health nursing. We run full-blown codes, respond to traumas, monitor and care for medical and surgical patients, provide clinic nurse support for MD's and mid-level providers, assess and triage inmates for further care, dispense medications, and teach, teach, teach. We don't work in the state Institutions because we can't work anywhere else...we work there because we are dedicated to providing health care to those who have fallen to the fringes of society. I was proud to be a nurse at MSP and took every opportunity to share with others...especially my neighbors here in Helena, what really goes on behind the locked doors of our state's largest secure facility. We, as society have a constitutional obligation to assure that those who are incarcerated are free from cruel and unusual punishment and this begins with maintaining a quality medical staff at each of our state institutions.

One would have to be living in a cave to have missed the latest reports on the increasing nursing shortage. According to the Council on Physician and Nurse Supply and The Bureau of Labor and Statistics, it is predicted that our nation will experience a shortage of 800,000 nurses by 2020. The same research shows us that in three years the number of nurses retiring will exceed the number of nurses entering the profession. On the other hand...the Montana DOC master plan final report from December 2008 reports that between 1995-2008 our average daily population in correctional facilities statewide increased from 6545 to 12,882 and is predicted to increase to 21,426 by 2025.

The reality for correctional facilities is that just as the incarcerated population continues to grow, the work-force that can care for them will tighten up. We need to make changes now so the State can create a needed market advantage that will attract and retain talented and dedicated nurses. One of those changes is recognizing the need for student loan payback for Montana nurses choosing to work in our state institutions. We have to recruit before we can retain and incentives such as those created by HB 224 will give us a head-start in the process. As for me...I will continue to write my monthly loan payback check and remind myself that I choose to work at one of the hardest professions in one of the most negative cultures and pray that there are others as dedicated as me to continue to stand in the gap in our states institutions without incentives offered by other hiring medical entities.

I urge you all to positively consider HB224.